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ABSTRACT

There are many studies of violence in marriage and in dating. Methodological differences between studies, however, make it difficult to determine differences in the nature and extent of physical assault between marital status groups. This study analyzed data from two surveys: a study of 526 dating couples at a large midwestern university, and a study of a national probability sample of 5,005 married and 237 cohabiting couples. The results showed that cohabiting couples had a higher rate of assault than did married couples. These findings persisted after controls for age and socioeconomic status were introduced. Violence was also more severe in cohabiting than in married or dating couples. A number of factors may account for the more frequent violence in cohabiting relationships. These include social isolation, the publicity given to wife-beating by the women's movement, questions of autonomy and control, and the investment in the relationship. When age was controlled, dating couples had the lowest violence rate of the three marital status groups. The fact that those who date generally are in a less serious/committed relationship as compared to those who cohabit or are married, may explain the lower rate of dating violence. (Author)

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# THE MARRIAGE LICENSE AS A HITTING LICENSE: A COMPARISON OF ASSAULTS IN DATING, COHABITING, AND MARRIED COUPLES*

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Abstract

There are many studies of violence in marriage and in dating. However, methodological differences between these studies makes it difficult to determine differences in the nature and extent of physical assault between marital status groups. This paper helps fill that gap by analyzing data from two surveys: a study of 526 dating couples at a large midwestern university, and a study of a national probability sample of 5,005 married and 237 cohabiting couples. The results show that cohabiting couples have a higher rate of assault than married couples. These findings persist after controls for age and socioeconomic status are introduced. Violence is also more severe in cohabiting than married or dating couples. A number of factors may account for the more frequent violence in cohabiting relationships. These include social isolation, the publicity given to wife-beating by the women's movement, questions of autonomy and control, and the investment in the relationship. When age is controlled, dating couples have the lowest violence rate of the three marital status groups. The fact that those who date generally are in a less serious/committed relationship (as compared to those who cohabit or are married) may explain the lower rate of dating violence.

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The pervasiveness of violence in intimate relationships is well documented. Each year, more than three million married couples experience one or more severe assaults each year (Straus and Gelles, 1988).[1] Violence in cohabiting relationships is also quite common. In fact, physical assaults may be more common and more severe among cohabiting couples than married couples (Yllo and Straus, 1981; Lane and Gwartney-Gibbs, 1985). Dating violence is also pervasive. It has been viewed as a hidden serious social problem (Bogal-Allbritten and Allbritten, 1985). About 20% of college students have been physically assaulted by a dating partner (Makepeace, 1981; Cate et al., 1982; Stets and Pirog-Good, 1987).

While some research suggest that the overall assault rate in dating may be comparable to or higher than that found in marriage (Bernard et al., 1985; Makepeace, 1986), the comparisons are questionable because the rates are not based on the same measurement techniques (e.g. Makepeace, 1981). Even when the same instrument is used, researchers do not usually identify which partner is violent, the severity of the assault, or whether this is different from that found in marriage or cohabiting relationships (for example, Cate et al., 1982). A similar problem occurs when cohabiting and marital violence are compared because of neglect in identifying which partner is violent and the severity of the assault.

It is important to compare marital status groups to see if differences in violence exist, and if so, how large the differences are. If differences exist, future research needs to address why these differences occur. For example, if violence is more common in cohabiting than marital relationships, what characteristics of cohabiting relationships make violence more likely? Identifying these factors may help obtain a better understanding of why violence occurs at all. Furthermore, it may provide valuable clues for treating and preventing violence in high risk groups.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The primary objective of this research is to compare the form and frequency of violence among those who date, cohabit and are married. The following questions will be addressed.

1. Are there differences in the frequency of assault across marital status groups? Given prior research, we anticipate that violence will be more common in cohabiting than marital relationships (Yllo and Straus, 1981; Lane and Gwartney-Gibbs, 1985). For cohabiting couples, social isolation, the lack of autonomy, and the lack of a deep investment in the relationship (compared to married people) may influence the high frequency of abuse. We do not know how dating violence will compare with the other marital status groups. On the one hand, dating violence may be more common than marital violence because there is less to lose if a dating relationship ends, or there might be a "reporting effect" if individuals who date are more willing to report assaults while those who are married may feel the need to support the image of wedded bliss. On the other hand, married and cohabiting individuals (thus those who are in a more committed relationship than those who date) may experience more conflict and stress which may give rise to more incidents of violence.

2. Does the severity of the assault vary by marital status? Based on prior research, (Yllo and Straus, 1981) we anticipate that violence will

be more severe in cohabiting than marital relationships. Cohabiting couples may be relatively isolated, lacking integration into a kin network, such that severe forms of assault are more likely to go unrecognized and unquestioned.

3. Does the partner who is violent vary by marital status? Prior research has not directly examined whether the use of violence by men and women varies across different marital status groups. There is evidence that husbands are as often victims of marital violence as wives (Steinmetz, 1978; Straus et al., 1980; Straus and Gelles, 1986, 1988). Additionally, research on dating violence has found no difference in the assault rate by sex (Deal and Wampler, 1986; Makepeace, 1986; Arias et al., 1987; Stets and Pirog-Good, 1987).[2] This paper examines violence by both men and women in dating, cohabiting, and marital relationships. We view violence as a mutual problem of both sexes (Breines and Gordon, 1983), even though, when injury occurs, it is probably not as grave for men as for women because men, on average, are physically stronger (Straus et al., 1980; Greenblat, 1983). However, the belief that women are more likely to hit out of retaliation or self-defense (Straus, 1980) has not been supported by the most recent and comprehensive study of this issue (Straus and Gelles, 1988) which shows that women initiate violence as often as men.

4. Does the gender of the respondent affect the rate of violence and the differences between marital status groups? Researchers have not examined possible sex biases in reporting violence. For example, if we find that women are as likely to assault than men, we need to establish whether this finding is real or an artifact of a sex bias in reporting.

This research attempts to answer the above questions and controls for age, occupational status and education. These controls are introduced to help rule out spurious relationships due to confounding of violence with age and socioeconomic status. Many other controls could be introduced, and future research needs to explore how they influence the patterns that emerge in this research.

## METHOD

### Samples

For the dating couples, a questionnaire was distributed to a random sample of students at a large Midwestern university during the Spring of 1987. Fifty-four percent of the randomly selected population completed the survey. A total of 526 individuals had complete information on physical violence and were included in our analysis. This sample is of college students and may not be representative of dating couples at large. The most likely effect of this bias in the sample is a reduction in the representation of low socioeconomic status couples. Therefore, the rate of violence for dating couples in this sample is probably an underestimate of the assault rate for dating couples at large given that the lower class seem to have a higher rate of violence (Straus et al., 1980).

The data on married and cohabiting couples is from the "National Family Violence Resurvey" conducted in the summer of 1985 (Straus and Gelles, 1986). The interviews were conducted by telephone using random

digit dialing to select a nationally representative sample. The respondent was the husband (or male partner) for a random half of the cases, and the wife for the other half. A total of 6,002 persons were interviewed. However, the number used in this paper is lower because single parent families are excluded, and because of missing data on certain questions. The response rate, calculated as "completes as a proportion of eligibles" was 84%. The sample is described in more detail in Straus and Gelles (1986, 1988).

## Violence Measures

The Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS) (Straus, 1979, 1987b) was used to measure the incidence of violence in dating, cohabiting and marital relationships. Respondents were asked how often, within the past year, they and their partner had used each of the following acts of physical violence: 1) threw an object at the partner; 2) pushed, grabbed or shoved; 3) slapped; 4) kicked, bit or punched; 5) hit or tried to hit with an object; 6) beat up; 7) threatened with a knife or gun; or 8) used a knife or gun.

Assault rate and Violence Type Percentages. Three different but overlapping measures of violence are used in this paper because each serves to illuminate a different facet of interpersonal violence. The first measure is the Assault rate per 100 couples.[3] This provides information on the incidence of physical violence among married, cohabiting, and dating couples. These data will be shown in the form of graphs. The second and third measures are typologies. These violence types are used for a more detailed analysis of the subset of respondents who experienced one or more violent acts during the year of the survey. These data will be given in tables.

Violence Types. Two violence types are identified: "Physical Violence I" and "Physical Violence II." Physical Violence I identifies which partner is violent: Male Only, Female Only, or Both. Physical Violence II uses the same categories of violent actors, but also distinguishes between "minor" assaults and "severe" assaults. There are eight categories:

(1) male used minor violence and female did not use violence;

(2) male did not use violence and female used minor violence;

(3) both used minor violence;

(4) male used severe violence and female did not use violence;

(5) male did not use violence and female used severe violence;

(6) male used severe violence and female used minor violence;

(7) male used minor violence and female used severe violence;

(8) both used severe violence.

Marital Status Measure

The married and cohabiting respondents are persons in households containing a currently married or cohabiting heterosexual couple. Households with a single parent or recently terminated marriage were excluded. The dating respondents were based on individuals who had dated during 1986. Married individuals were excluded.

Age Measure

For married and cohabiting respondents, the respondent's age was grouped into four categories: 18-24, 25-34, 35-44, and 45 and over. The dating respondents only included those ages 18-24.

Occupational Status Measure

Married and cohabiting respondents were classified as "blue collar" and "white collar" (which are somewhat parallel to "working class" and "middle class") using the Bureau of Labor Statistics revised Occupational Classification system.[4] Each Bureau of Labor Statistics occupation code was classified as either blue collar or white collar using the list of occupations falling into these categories by Rice (see Robinson et al., 1969).

If respondents were currently unemployed, housewives, or students, their occupational code was based on their most recent paid job. If they never held a job for pay, they were coded as missing. To establish the occupational status of the relationship, the respondent's occupational status was used. When we examined the relationship between husbands' and wives' occupations, we found that two-thirds of the cases were concordant. Therefore, respondent's occupational status approximates the occupational status of the relationship.

## MARITAL STATUS AND VIOLENCE

Figure 1 shows that cohabiting couples are more likely to have experienced violence than those in dating or marital relationships.[5] The line for "Either" shows that almost 35 out of every 100 cohabiting couples, experienced a physical assault during the previous year compared to 19.8 per 100 dating couples and 14.7 per 100 married couples. Moreover, cohabiting couples have the highest rates for each of the three specific types of violence. For example, in 18 out of every 100 cohabiting couples, both were violent, which is about double the rates for dating and married couples.

(Figure 1 and Table 1 about here)

Two other points worth noting about the rates in Figure 1 are that Female Only violence is less common among the married than the other marital status groups, and the lowest rate for Male Only violence is among dating couples.

Table 1 focuses on the subsample who reported one or more assaults. It shows the distribution of types of violence among those couples who experienced violence. Comparison of the percentages in the first column shows that Female Only violence type is a larger proportion of the violence among dating couples (39.4%) than other marital status groups (28.6% and 26.9% for those who are married and cohabit, respectively). Male Only violence is a larger proportion of the violence in cohabiting (20.7%) and marital (23.2%) than dating (10.5%) relationships. There is little difference among marital status groups with respect to the Both Violent category.

In general, Figure 1 indicates that among all couples, there is a tendency for assaults to be most common in cohabiting relationships and slightly more common in dating than marital relationships. Among couples where there was an assault, Table 1 shows that Female Only violence most often occurs in dating relationships and Male Only violence mostly occurs in marital and cohabiting relationships. Situations in which both partners are violent occur about equally often in all marital status groups.

Figure 2 and Table 2 extend the analysis by taking into account the severity of assault by men and women in marital, cohabiting, and dating relationships. With two exceptions, the plot lines in Figure 2 show that cohabiting couples have the highest assault rate. For minor violence, cohabiting couples have roughly double the rate of the other two groups (8.0 versus 4.2 and 4.2); while for severe violence committed by both partners, cohabiting couples have more than six times the rate of the dating and married couples. Both exceptions to the tendency for assault to be greatest among cohabiting couples involve a more severe level of violence by the female partner than the male partner. With this exception, the higher risk of an assault among cohabiting couples also applies when the severity of the assault is controlled.

(Figure 2 and Table 2 about here)

Turning to the subsample of violent couples, Table 2 indicates some types of violence in which there is little difference between dating, married and cohabiting couples, and other types in which the difference is large. There is little difference in the percent of violent couples who are in the Both Minor type (both partners engaged in minor assaults). However, there is a large difference in the Both Severe category (both severely violent). Twenty-two percent of violent cohabiting couples have both partners using severe violence compared to less than 11% of violent dating or marital couples. Furthermore, the high percentage of Female Only violence while dating and Male Only violence while cohabiting and married typically manifests itself in minor violence. In sum, the results in Figure 2 and Table 2 suggest that not only are cohabiting couples at greatest risk for violence, but, in addition, the most dangerous forms of violence occur when individuals cohabit. This is because severe violence that is carried out by both partners is most common in cohabiting relationships.

Age and Marital Status

It is possible that the relationship between marital status and physical assault is spurious because age exerts an influence on both marital status and violence. Dating and cohabiting couples are likely to be younger. Additionally, a previous national survey (Straus et al., 1980) found that husband-to-wife violence decreased with age. Therefore, the relationship between marital status and violence may disappear when age is controlled. To investigate this possibility, we analyzed the relationship between: 1) age and marital status, 2) age and assault and 3) marital status and assault with age controlled. Recall that the dating category only includes the age group 18-24. Therefore, when the analysis includes age groups older than 18-24, the dating category is omitted.

With respect to age and marital status, individuals between ages 18-24 are more likely to cohabit (20.3%) than are those between ages 25-34 (6.7%), 35-44 (3.5%) and 45 and older (.9%). Conversely, those between ages 18-24 are less likely to be married (79.7%) than those between ages 25-34 (93.3%), 35-44 (96.5%) and 45 and older (99.1%) ($X^2$=298.0; $p < .001$).

With respect to age and violence, the assault rate decreases uniformly with age ($X^2$=357.3; $p < .001$). Using the "either violent" criterion, in the age group 18-24, 33.3 out of every 100 couples are violent, compared to 23.8 for ages 25-34, 14.4 for ages 35-44 and 7.3 for those 45 and older. The rate for Both Violent also declines with age. In the age group 18-24, both men and women are violent in 21.8 out of every 100 couples compared to 12.9 for ages 25-34, 6.3 for ages 35-44 and 2.7 for those 45 and older. Finally, Female Only violence decreases with age. The rate for the age group 18-24 is 10.7 for every 100 couples compared to 6.0 for ages 25-34, 3.9 for ages 35-44, and 2.4 for those 45 and older.[6]

In summary, the results indicate that violence among married and cohabiting couples declines with age. Among the violent couples, the older the respondent, the smaller the percentage of couples in the Both Violent category and the smaller the percentage of Female Only violence.

Since age influences both marital status and assault, we examine the effects of age and marital status on violence through log-linear analysis (Knoke and Burke, 1980). This provides a test of the effect of age (net of marital status), marital status (net of age), and the interaction of age and marital status on violence.[7] The results indicate that, while age and marital status exert their own influence on violence, the interaction between age and marital status is nonsignificant ($X^2$ for Age = 30.6, $p < .001$; Status = 10.5, $p < .05$; Age*Status = 11.0, n.s.). Thus, age and marital status each have their own independent effects on violence. The age effects are not contingent upon marital status, and the marital status effects are the same for all age groups.

(Figure 3 and Table 3 about here)

The rates for each of the cells in the log-linear analysis are displayed in Figure 3. All but 3 of the 16 marital status comparisons in Figure 3 show a higher rate for cohabiting than married couples, and most of the differences are large.

Table 3, like the other tables, is focused on the subsample who reported one or more assaults. The column headed Female Only in the section labeled Age shows a tendency for the percent of this pattern of violence to increase with age among cohabiting couples, but not among married couples (although the percent violent in the age group 45 and older for cohabiting couples is only based on three cases). The Male Only type also shows a tendency to increase with age for both married and cohabiting couples. The column headed Both shows that the proportion of couples where both partners are violent decreases with age.

Therefore, the findings reveal that overall, violence decreases uniformly with age in both cohabiting and marital relationships. This is not surprising given that criminal violence is most common among the young (Uniform Crime Reports, 1984). However, for those who remain violent, with age, violence shifts away from Both partners being violent to one or the other being violent.

The importance of controlling for age is brought out by comparing the assault rate for those ages 18-24 who are married, cohabiting and dating. Without the age control, it seems as though dating couples are more violent than married couples (top line of Figure 1). However, comparison of the violence rate for dating couples with the rates for married and cohabiting couples of the same age (18-24) in the left panel of Figure 3 shows that violence is most common in cohabiting relationships and more common in marital than dating relationships.

Socioeconomic Status and Marital Status

Occupation. The relationship between marital status and assault may also be influenced by occupational status. For example, Straus et al. (1980) found a lower rate of marital violence for the white collar than blue collar group. Similar results were found in this survey; that is, violence is more common in blue collar than white collar relationships ($X^2$=10.2, $p < .05$).

A log-linear analysis of violence by occupational status and marital status reveals significant main effects for marital status, occupational class, and a significant marital status by class interaction ($X^2$ for Occupational Status = 10.2, $p < .05$; Marital Status = 47.22, $p < .001$; Occupation by Marital Status = 7.9, $p < .05$). Figure 4 displays the rates. It shows an overall tendency for the assault rate to be lower among married couples compared to cohabiting couples, but the difference is somewhat less pronounced among white collar couples than blue collar couples and does not apply at all to the Male Only type of violence among white collar couples.

(Figure 4 about here)

The panel in Table 3 headed Occupational Class shows that among violent couples, there is no significant main effect for either marital status or occupational status. However, there is a significant interaction effect between these two variables: the proportion of Female Only and Male Only changes from blue to white collar but only for those who cohabit. Specifically, the proportion of violent couples in the category Female Only increases from 19% in the blue collar group to 38.2%

in the white collar group, while Male Only violence decreases from 31% for blue collar men to 11.8% for white collar men.

Education. Earlier it was shown that when controlling for age, those who date have a lower rate of violence than those who cohabit or are married. This finding may be due to the fact that dating couples in this study had a higher education than the other marital status groups. Research has shown that education is negatively related to husband-to-wife violence (Hotaling and Sugarman, 1986). Therefore, we controlled on education for the age group 18-24 for married and cohabiting couples. However, we found that education did not significantly influence the rate of violence. In other words, those who had no college education were not significantly different from those who had some college in terms of violence. This suggests that those who date but are not in college may not be different in terms of the violence they inflict or sustain. However, future research should directly examine violence among those who date but are not in college and those who date but are older (age 25 and older) to see if the patterns found here remain.

In summary, violence is lower among white collar than blue collar couples especially for those who cohabit. For Female Only violence, this pattern is reversed for cohabiting couples: white collar Female Only violence is higher than blue collar Female Only violence. Future research needs to explore what might explain this marital status difference. Finally, we found that education did not influence the rate of violence for the age group 18-24 across marital status groups suggesting that those who date and are in college may not be significantly different in terms of violence from those who have no college education.

## Gender of Respondent

Finally, we examined the possibility that the findings reflect a gender bias in willingness to report violence. For example, Figure 1 shows that Female Only violence is more common than Male Only violence in every marital status group. These differences may be due to gender differences in reporting assaults. In other words, the percent of Female Only violence may be higher than the percent of Male Only violence, not because it actually occurs with greater frequency, but because women may be more likely to tell an interviewer about their violence. The analysis to investigate this possibility among respondents aged 18-24 (the only age group for which we have data on all three marital status groups) is presented in Figure 5.

(Figure 5 about here)

The left side of Figure 5, which displays the violence rates as described by male respondents is clearly different than the picture based on information provided by female respondents on the right side of the figure. However, the differences do not follow the pattern described above because in every marital status category the Female Only assault rate is greater than the Male Only assault rate.

This may seem like a surprising finding, but similar results have been reported in a number of previous studies (summarized in Straus and Gelles, 1988). The high rate of female assaults in this study is also consistent with the data on homicidal assaults. The rate of homicides

committed by females overall is one-fifth the rate of male homicides, but within the family, women commit nearly half (48%) of all homicides (Plass and Straus, 1987).[8]

We investigated two factors which might explain the high rate of female violence in this study. First, we looked at minor and severe violence separately to see if the higher rate of Female Only violence was mainly due to more minor violence by women and found no support for this explanation.

Another possibility is that the high rate of Female Only assaults in Figure 5 occurs because that data refers to young couples (age 18-24). We therefore replicated the analysis for men and women ages 25 and older who were married and cohabiting. The results showed that, consistent with other research, the Female Only assault rate is similar to the rate of Male Only assaults. Although these analyses may help to rule out the possibility that the results are due to confounding with age and gender, they leave unresolved the reasons for the high rate of Female Only violence among young couples and indeed the even more fundamental question of the reasons why violence by females primarily occurs within the family (see Straus 1980 and Straus and Gelles 1988 for some suggestions).

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This study compared the rate of physical assault between partners in 526 dating couples, 237 cohabiting couples, and 5005 married couples. Four research questions were investigated. The findings indicate that: (1) The highest rate of assault is among the cohabiting couples. (2) Violence is most severe in cohabiting couples. (3) For all three marital status groups, the most frequent pattern was for both partners to be violent, followed by Female Only, and the least frequent pattern was Male Only violence. (4) The gender of the respondent did not affect the rate of violence reported.

Controls for age and occupational status do not alter the finding that there is much more violence, and more severe violence, among cohabiting than married couples. These findings are consistent with an earlier study (Yllo and Straus, 1981). Thus, the greater risk of assault typically occurs when individuals live together but are not married.

Other patterns require comment. Without controls for age, dating couples have a higher rate of assault than married couples. When age is controlled, dating couples have the lowest violence rate of the three marital status groups. Finally, we find that there is a high rate of Female Only violence. This persists after controlling for age and gender of the respondent.

### Practical Implications

Cohabitation as an alternative living arrangement has steadily increased since 1970. In 1970, there were 523,000 unmarried couples who were living together and this more than doubled by 1978 to 1.1 million couples (Glick and Spanier, 1980). By 1980, there were approximately 1.6 million cohabiting couples (more than triple the number since 1970) and

this increased to 1.8 million couples by 1981 (Spanier, 1983). Given this increase, more individuals may be at risk not only of minor violence, but severe violence.[9]

Theories Of Violence

A theoretical analysis of why assaults are more common while cohabiting suggests that a number of factors may play a part. These include social isolation, the publicity given to wife-beating by the women's movement, questions of autonomy and control, and the investment (both material and psychological) which the couple have in each other.

Social Isolation. Married couples are more likely to be embedded in a network of kin who may help the marital couple monitor violent behavior. Conversely, cohabiting couples may be relatively isolated, either by choice or because of a lingering stigma on this type of relationship. Whatever the reason, to the extent that this difference exists, cohabiting couples will lack integration into a kin network, and therefore physical violence may be less likely to be recognized or challenged (Cazenave and Straus, 1979).

The Campaign Against Wife-Beating. There has been a decade long effort by the women's movement to stop physical assaults on women by their partners. There are now about a thousand "shelters" or "safe-houses" and "hot lines" for battered women. While no treatment programs for men who batter existed before the early 1970s, by 1985, about 100 programs were available (Pirog-Good and Stets, 1986). Police are increasingly treating an assault on a spouse in the same way as other assaults. Although such programs and policies have become widespread (Kalmuss and Straus, 1983; Straus and Gelles, 1986), and although the facilities and programs are open to cohabiting as well as dating couples, it is possible that the "message" about the moral and criminal sanctions on wife-beating have reached fewer cohabiting than married couples.

Autonomy And Control. It is also possible that some enter cohabiting rather than marriage, to keep more of their own independence, only to find that there are frequent arguments over rights, duties, and obligations which may lead to violence. This suggests that successfully controlling another, or being controlled by another, may be more problematic in cohabiting than marital relationships, and thus lead to more incidents of violence. Indeed, research indicates that where the issue of control frequently arises, violence often occurs (Burke et al., 1987; Stets and Pirog-Good, 1987; Stets and Pirog-Good, 1988; Stets, 1988). Future research needs to investigate the features of cohabiting relationships, among them, the issue of control, that influence the high rate of violence.

Questions of autonomy and control also apply to dating couples, but violence is less common in dating relationships (after age is controlled). One possible explanation is that dating couples are not as involved with each other as much as cohabiting or married couples. Research has shown that the more serious or involved the partners are, the more likely that violence will occur (Hotaling and Straus, 1980; Cate et al., 1982; Laner and Thompson, 1982; Laner, 1983; Henton et al., 1983; Sigelman et al., 1984; Roscoe and Benaske, 1985; Stets and Pirog-Good, 1987; Arias et al.,

1987). It is likely that experiencing a deeper commitment, possessing information about the other's insecurities and weaknesses, and knowing what is expected of oneself and the other, have the potential for leading to conflict since if any one of the them is threatened, it may be the basis for inflicting violence (Stets and Pirog-Good, 1987).

Investment In The Relationship. Cohabiting couples may be more violent than married couples because they tend to share certain features which gives rise to conflict, but they may lack some features of marriage which serve to constrain the conflict from escalating into physical assaults. The feature which cohabiting couples share with married couples is the conflict inherent in a primary group relationship.[10] To take one example, in a marital or cohabiting relationship, everything about the partner is of concern to the other and hence little or nothing is off-limits for discussion and conflict. Consequently, there is an inherently high level of conflict in marriage and cohabiting.

On the other hand, conflict does not necessarily lead to violence. There are other modes of resolving conflicts, or one party may implicitly decide that the potential costs of violence cannot be risked. These costs may be greater for married than for cohabiting couples to the extent that married couples have a greater material, social, and psychological investment in the relationship, and a greater long term interest in the relationship. Consequently, they may be more constrained to control assault to avoid the risk of such acts terminating the marriage and to lessen the risk of the partner being injured or even killed (resulting in a greater loss) (Straus, 1987). Thus, although the marriage license may be an implicit hitting license in a normative sense (Straus, 1976), the structural realities of marriage also tend to impose a ceiling on the frequency and severity of violence; whereas the similar normative tolerance of violence in cohabiting couples is not subject to the same structural constraints.

## FOOTNOTES

1. For purposes of this paper, the term "violence" refers to physical violence. Violence is defined as an act carried out with the intention or perceived intention of causing physical pain or injury. This definition is synonymous with the legal concept of "assault" and the concept of "physical aggression" used in social psychology. Consistent with the legal concept of assault, physical injury is not a criterion. As Marcus (1983:89) puts it "Physical contact is not an element of the crime" or as the Uniform Crime Reports of the FBI (1984:21) puts it "Attempts are included [in the tabulation of aggravated assault] because it is not necessary that an injury result."

   The theoretical ambiguity of the terms "abuse" and "violence" and a conceptual analysis of these and other related terms is given in Gelles (1985) and Gelles and Straus (1979). See also Straus and Lincoln (1985) for a theoretical analysis of the "criminalization" of family violence.

2. Evidence on the frequency and form of violence used by men and women while dating is mixed. See the summary in Straus and Gelles (1988).

For example, Makepeace (1986) indicates that men are more likely to be the aggressors than women while Plass and Gessner (1983) find that women are more likely to be the aggressors than men. Additionally, while some studies indicate that men use more severe violence than women (Lane and Gwartney-Gibbs, 1985), others indicate women use more severe violence than men (Sigelman et al., 1984). More research is needed to resolve these contradictory findings.

3. This could be identified as the percent who are violent, but the term violence rate is used to avoid confusion with the use of percentage in the second measure.

4. The occupational status of those who date was not collected because all respondents were attending school full-time.

5. Since the X axis variable is not continuous, readers familiar with graphing conventions will wonder why line graphs were used rather than bar charts. Graphs were explored because the tables were difficult to comprehend. However, the bar chart versions were equally or more difficult to comprehend, especially Figures 2, 3 and 5. The line graphs, in our opinion, bring out the main points more clearly than any other mode of presentation.

6. Among those who are violent, the percentages in each Violence Type I group are similar to the pattern found for all respondents. The Both Violent category declines with age ($X^2$=27.1; $p < .001$). In ages 18-24, 58.5% of the couples are characterized by abuse by both partners, compared to 54.1% for ages 25-34, 43.9% for ages 35-44 and 36.4% for those 45 and older. Furthermore, the distribution of violence changes with age. While the Both Violent category decreases with age, the distribution of violence shifts to Female Only and Male Only violence. For example, in ages 18-24 there is 12.9% Male Only violence compared to 20.6% for ages 25-34, 29.1% for ages 35-44 and 29.8% for those 45 and older. There is a similar increase in Female Only violence.

7. The dating category is omitted from the log linear analysis because individuals are between ages 18-24. However, the descriptive statistics for the dating group are shown in Figure 3.

8. Actually, these findings are somewhat different because we found that the rate of Female Only violence is <u>higher</u> than the rate of violence by male partners, whereas previous studies tend to find that within the family (as contrasted with outside the family) the assault rates of men and women are very similar.

9. It is possible that the causal sequence is the opposite of what has just been suggested. This could occur if individuals cohabit because they have experienced violence in a prior marriage, and they do not want to marry again for fear that violence will reoccur. Individuals may choose to cohabit because they think this will deter violence. In this sense, those who are at a higher risk for violence may opt to cohabit.

10. Dating couples may be less violent because they are less involved in a relationship, and thus these conflict-generating characteristics do not apply as strongly in their case. The conflict-generating characteristics of intent in primary groups, and the family, in particular, are specified in Hotaling and Straus (1980) and Straus (1987a).

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Figure 1. Assault Rates by Marital Status (The "Either" category is the sum of the other three)

Figure 2. Assault Rates (II) by Marital Status

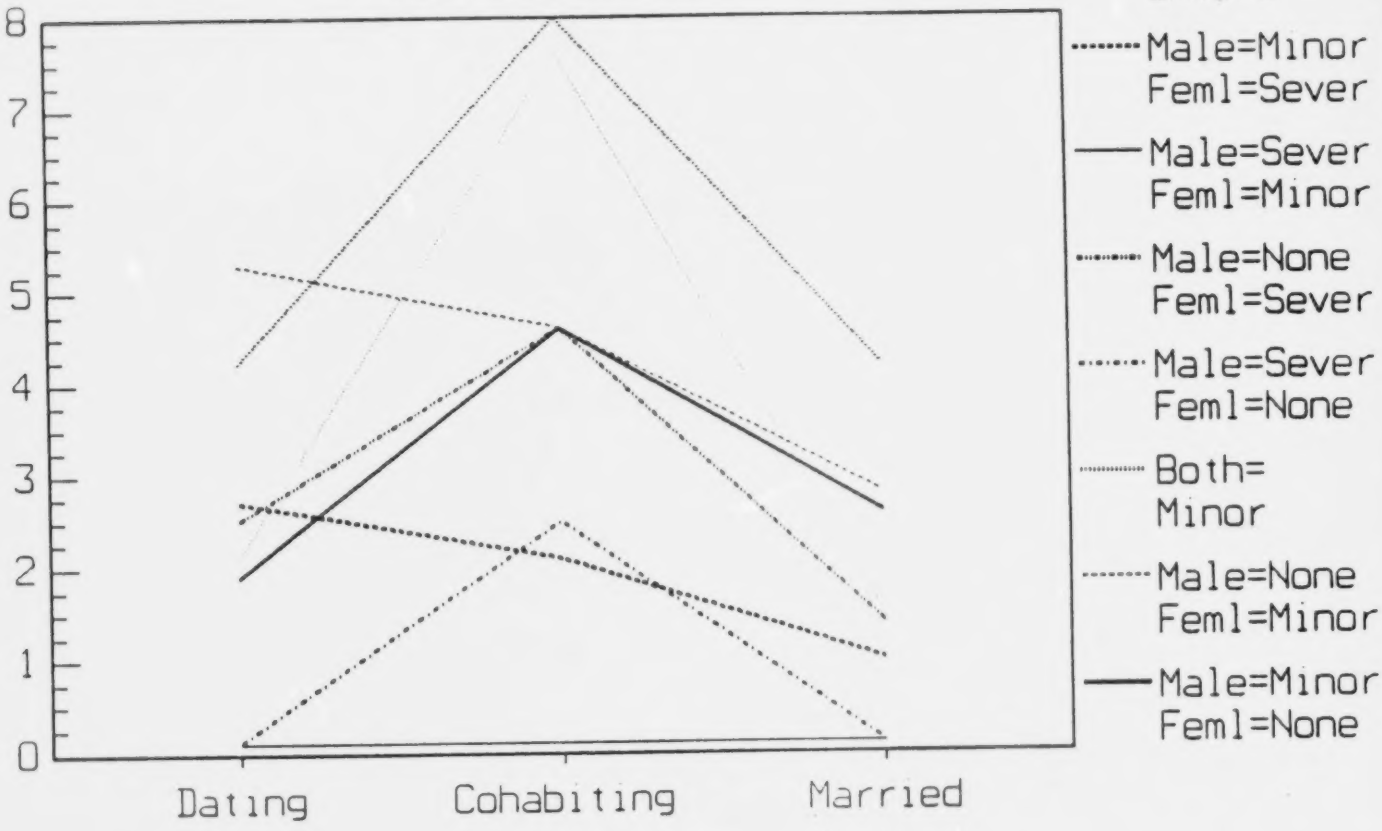

Figure 3. Assault Rates by
Marital Status and Age

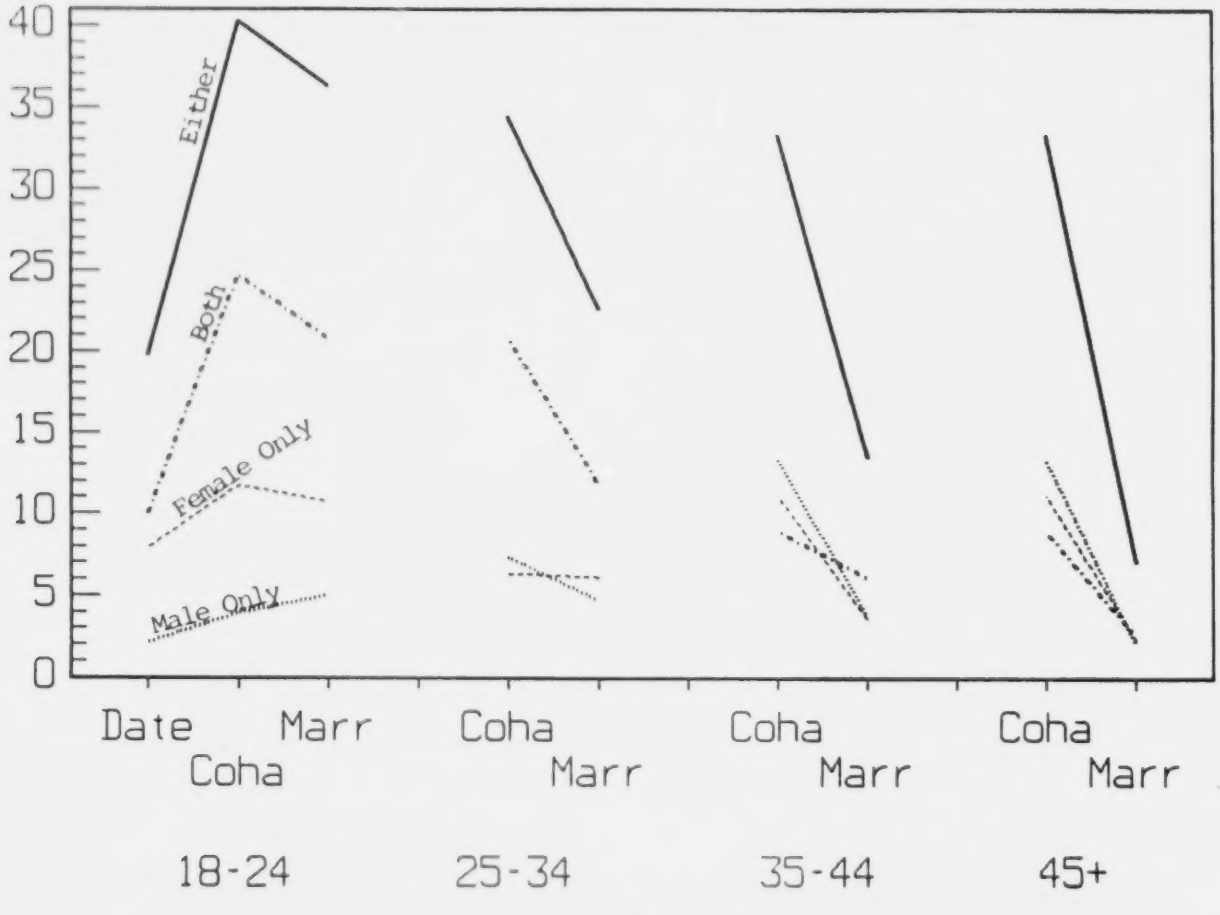

Figure 4. Assault Rates by Marital Status and Occupational Class

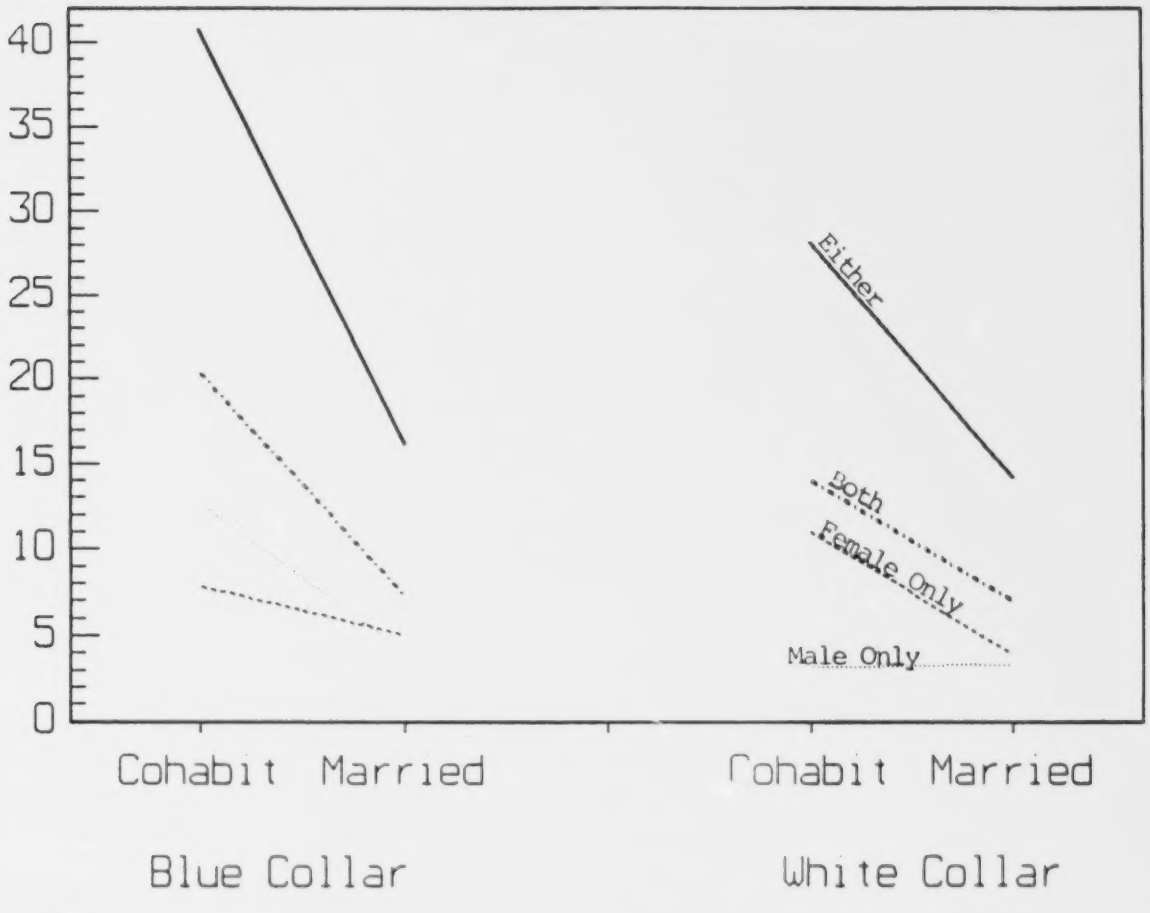

Figure 5. Assault Rates by Marital Status and Gender Of Respondent

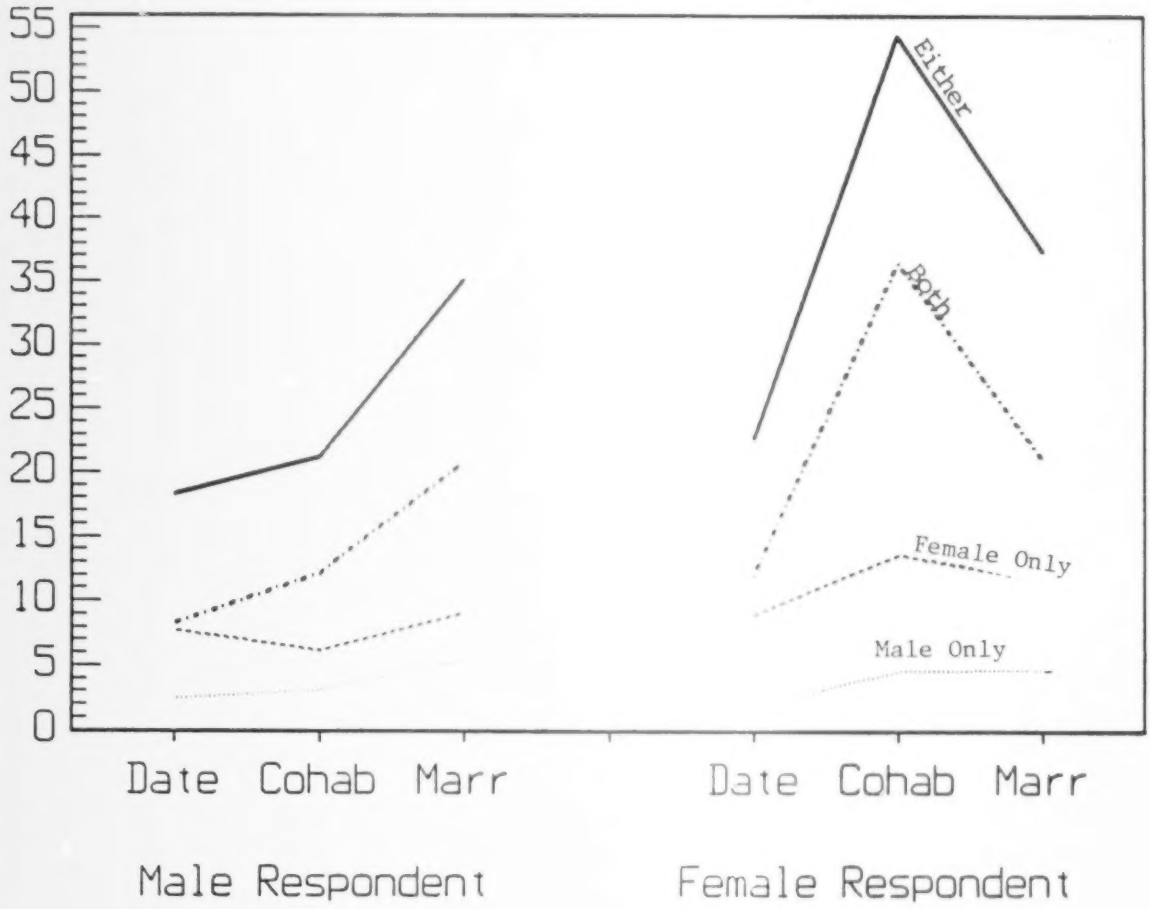

Table 1. Violent Couples: Percent In Each Violence Type by Marital Status

| Marital Status | Violence Type I: Female Only | Male Only | Both | N |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Dating | 39.4% | 10.5% | 50.0% | 104 |
| Cohabit | 26.9% | 20.7% | 52.4% | 82 |
| Married | 28.6% | 23.2% | 48.2% | 736 |

$X^2 = 10.4$, $p < .05$

Table 2. Violent Couples: Percent In Each Violence Type by Marital Status

| | Physical Assault II Category: M-Minor F-None | M-None F-Minor | Both Minor | M-Sev F-None | M-None F-Sev | M-Sev F-Minor | M-Minor F-Sev | Both Sev | N |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Dating | 9.6% | 26.9% | 21.2% | .1% | 12.5% | 4.8% | 13.5% | 10.6% | 104 |
| Cohabit | 3.5% | 13.4% | 23.2% | 7.3% | 13.4% | 1.2% | 6.1% | 22.0% | 82 |
| Married | 7.5% | 18.9% | 28.3% | 5.7% | 9.6% | 2.4% | 7.1% | 10.5% | 736 |

$X^2$ for Violence Type Percentages = 135.4, $p < .001$

Table 3. Violent Couples: Percent In Each Violence Type, by Age, Occupational Class, and Gender of Respondent

| Control | Marital Status | Physical Assault Types: Female Only | Male Only | Both | N |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Age** | | | | | |
| 18-24 | Cohabiting | 29.0% | 9.7% | 61.3% | 31 |
| | Married | 29.1% | 13.6% | 56.4% | 110 |
| 25-34 | Cohabiting | 18.2% | 21.2% | 60.6% | 33 |
| | Married | 26.9% | 20.7% | 52.4% | 309 |
| 35-44 | Cohabiting | 33.3% | 40.0% | 26.7% | 15 |
| | Married | 26.9% | 28.0% | 45.1% | 175 |
| 45+ | Cohabiting | 66.7% | 33.3% | 0% | 3 |
| | Married | 34.2% | 29.4% | 36.4% | 143 |

$X^2$ for Age = 2.3, $p < .10$; Status = 0.1, n.s.;
Age*Status = 3.6, n.s.

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Occupational Class** | | | | | |
| Blue C. | Cohabiting | 19.0% | 31.0% | 50.0% | 42 |
| | Married | 30.8% | 24.5% | 44.7% | 302 |
| White C. | Cohabiting | 38.2% | 11.8% | 50.0% | 34 |
| | Married | 27.1% | 23.5% | 49.4% | 399 |

$X^2$ for Occ. Status = 4.8, $p < .10$; Marital Status = 1, n.s.;
Occ*Marital = 6.0, $p < .05$

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Gender Of Respondent** | | | | | |
| Male | Dating | 42.1% | 13.2% | 44.7% | 38 |
| | Cohabiting | 28.6% | 14.3% | 57.1% | 7 |
| | Married | 25.6% | 15.4% | 59.0% | 39 |
| Female | Dating | 39.1% | 7.8% | 53.1% | 64 |
| | Cohabiting | 25.0% | 8.3% | 66.7% | 24 |
| | Married | 31.0% | 12.7% | 56.3% | 71 |

$X^2$ for Gender = 1.0, n.s.; Status = 3.8, n.s.;
Sex*Status = 0.9, n.s.

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